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BOOK REVIEW

Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen (eds): *Elements of Architecture: Assembling archaeology, atmosphere and the performance of building spaces*. London: Routledge, 2016. 444 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-77541-1

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After having studied for several years and graduated from a school of architecture, I usually tend to avoid reading anything that includes the term ‘architecture’ in its title. My position, which may sound somewhat radical, draws on the thought that architects are, quite often, professionals who have not been trained to express themselves through writing – and so, when they write, their texts tend to be too technical or too poetic, with no in-between. Thankfully, this is not the case in the exceptional volume *Elements of Architecture: Assembling archaeology, atmosphere and the performance of building spaces*, edited by Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen. Here, the weight of De Landa’s and Latour’s theories is remarkable, and contributions are coherently written by archaeologists, geographers, anthropologists and philosophers, ultimately denoting the intrinsic interdisciplinary character of architecture for which I have always advocated.

In short, the book delves into something that seems to be evident though, living in an era in which we are bombarded by images, is commonly overlooked; that is, architecture cannot be reduced merely to its tangible and visual attributes. If the purpose of architectural works is to be lived in, experienced and inhabited, why should we restrict ourselves to a cold analysis? What is the role of full embodied perception and affect(ion) in all this? The editors wisely address these issues in the introduction through the theorization of the keywords that are, in fact, present in the volume’s title. Hence, the term ‘element’ is critically reviewed due to its incapacity to generate anything in singular form, or in the editors’ words, ‘architecture, we argue, is what emerges when the elements are assembled’ (p. 12). This subsequently leads to a comprehension of ‘assemblage’ as *more* than just the sum of single elements/parts. Further, ‘atmosphere’ is defined as the *sense of presence* that is needed in architecture, which is described as ‘an intangible phenomenon in people’s lives’ (p. 13), while ‘performance’ contributes to the complete realisation of architecture beyond the limitations of simple planning. And even though these thoughts may seem excessively theoretical (indeed, certain parts of the introduction are quite dense), the editors have utilised a set of well-known architectural projects to clarify, and materialize, these ideas in a successful manner.

The volume consists of twenty-two contributions that have been coherently grouped into four different parts: Form and temporality; Atmospheres; Performance and process; and Disintegration and unfinishedness. The editors sufficiently justify and enlighten these themes both in the main introduction and in the brief forewords that precede each part, and I will not retrace these. However, I would like to highlight some (common) aspects of the various contributions, regardless of their placement in the volume, that I found to generate a sense of coherency and density to the work. Due to limited space I am unable to go through every contribution in-depth but this will allow me to deal with the volume as an assembled whole and establish some links between its parts.

The first point I would like to mention regards the volume's scope, both in terms of disciplinary spectrum and the range of case studies, reflecting a wide geographical and temporal spectrum: from Neolithic long barrows to unfinished developments in China as products of the recent speculative crisis. In-between, the volume moves from excavations of mid eighteenth century architecture in Iceland to an archaeology of nuclear waste in New Mexico. From the production of renewed religious practices in post-industrial Mexico to traffic infrastructures as landmarks of modernity. There are even two studies in which temporal thresholds are crossed: the analysis of the Ardnamurchan peninsula in Scotland is a reflection on the coexistence of a variety of archaeological remains dating over a period of six millennia and, in a different contribution, an alternative relation between the notions of 'ruin' and 'monument' is expressed by reviewing the work of Palladio, Piranesi and Kahn. Such is the outstanding interdisciplinary character of the volume. On the other hand, let's take, for example, the two oldest case studies and the scope of the book will become clear. McFayden studies the aforementioned Neolithic long barrows, however, instead of providing the usual descriptive analysis, she focuses on 'the details of their making' (p. 13) and the understanding of *bodies* in their construction process. Along these lines, McMahon explores Mesopotamian ziggurats in a novel way that theorizes the *sensations* of using and looking (for and at) these massive constructions. Isn't it appealing to use Lefebvre, de Certeau or Foucault's thinking to interpret ziggurats? As I see it, every generation builds its own relationship with the past, and thus, applying contemporary humanities to architectural works that were built so long ago, is undoubtedly enriching.

Research methodologies and the use of language vary from one contribution to another – something that benefits the interdisciplinary audience to whom the volume is addressed. Harman's discussion on anthropocene objects (a concept that will be increasingly important in the future); Ingold's approach to air and atmosphere (an interesting reflection on realities that are usually dismissed for being too physically present); and Kaye's phenomenological inquiry into performance architecture, are all extensively theoretical and philosophical. I have to admit that, were the reader not too familiar with both the topics and the references cited, at times it could be hard to follow these pieces' arguments. On the other hand, and surely due to the volume's focus on senses and affection, most of the contributions rely on an ethnographic writing style, with a high degree of empirical content, but which is narrated in first person. This does not mean that theoretical discussions are omitted, but rather, in my opinion, such a prose helps to exemplify and ground these discussions.

Thus, we find Murawski's comparison between how a Soviet tower-building in Warsaw represents the power of Stalinism and how it is actually perceived (in a less pompous sense) by people on a daily basis. Kohn and Dawdy make an interesting analysis of La Paz's self-constructed landscape, putting the duality between informal and formal cities into question while stating that the former may not be as unplanned as it first seems. Love's personal engagement in

self-constructed projects in Australia talks not only about observation but about the sensory experience of doing. Yaneva witnesses the design steps of the new Birmingham train station at a star-architect studio, unveiling a process that is usually quite hush-hush. Zimmerman applies archaeological methods to grasp the complexities of homeless people living in the USA, making evident how an archaeological approach is relevant and revealing also for the present. Nielsen takes back the notion of process to delve into how Mozambique's social personhood is constantly being shaped through the sluggish pace of houses' construction. And last but not least, Bærenholdt uses a sort of online ethnography (comments taken from Tripadvisor) to measure the expectations versus realities recounted by tourists after visiting North Cape Hall in Norway. Through their different ways of investigating, each and every researcher projects architecture as a field of knowledge that can only be fully understood through embodiment, and yet, the 'form' of their contributions is coherent with their 'function' (the never-ending discussion between form and function applied to architecture is, indeed, another key theme throughout this volume).

Since my own area of expertise is the study of modern ruins, I wish to dwell a bit on three particular writings in the volume. On the topic of industrial ruins in the UK, Edensor first develops an interesting argument on 'how every building at all times is in the process of ruination' (p. 349). This makes one think about a metaphoric parallelism between buildings and human mortality because, after all, we are all moving towards death from the very moment we are born. For Edensor, however, a building should not be thought of as a failure in itself, and he invites us to consider that the only thing that may fail is the purpose for which such a building was erected. Pétursdóttir, aligned with the (auto)ethnographic narrative mentioned above, crafts a brilliant discussion of an abandoned herring station/factory in Iceland. She uses extremely sensitive and romantic prose to put care, love and affection on the table and, though these feelings are commonly excluded from the scientific realm, she points towards how this form of subjectivity and affect(ion) may serve to elaborate renewed senses of heritage. Finally, Ulfstjerne's piece on unfinished developments in China is of great interest and originality. Considering global economic developments, I have no doubt that unfinished architecture will be a future trend in research and it is inspiring to see how its intrinsic negative origin can be turned into 'a potential for adaptation' (p. 403).

I would not like to conclude this review without touching upon the impressive publication of the volume. I can confirm that, after several weeks working with it, it is a durable hardback book with extensive graphic information and beautiful black and white pictures in large format – there is even an emotive contribution on Brussels' architectural eclecticism mediated in the form of a photo-essay. In sum, for a volume that deals with the notion of 'assemblage', there should be no better compliment than saying that the book functions as an assemblage in itself: the whole is much *more* than just a collection of essays.

Leaving aside one's own background, every reader will find that fundamental questions are tackled admirably; at least, someone who has always seen himself as an architect among social scientists and social scientist among architects thinks so. And ultimately, the volume confirms my suspicions: people who are not architects have a lot to say about architecture.